HERITAGE YMCA GROUP

MAYOR'S PRAYER BREAKFAST

Naperville, IL

December 6, 2007

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

What an amazing time it is, Advent, Christmas. It brings out the best in us — as we slow down, and soften, and sit and listen, as we ponder simple realities, like human birth, a child — the children, as we ponder they mystery of human love, and as we worry and fuss and finally find the perfect gift for our loved one or ones, our beloved.

And it brings out the worst, I suppose, or at least the silliest. A front page picture in the *Tribune* a few weeks ago showed Terrance Hodges of the

Nativity Scene Committee holding a plastic baby Jesus in his arms. Mr. Hodges' face is grim, determined. Inside, the headline read, "In Daley Plaza, Jesus Tucked In-Tightly. Figure Bolted Down after Thefts from City Nativity Scenes."

The article explained in recent years there have been numerous incidents of missing baby Jesuses from Christian Nativity Scenes. Jesus was first stolen from the Nativity in Daley Plaza in 1999 — and surreptitiously stashed in a locker at Union Station. It happened again in 2004 when a student at the Art Institute School was caught carrying Jesus a few blocks away. And then, remarkably, last December 32 plastic baby Jesuses were stolen from nativity scenes and then

lined up along the fence of a South Side woman's lawn.

And so a group of volunteers who assemble the Nativity at Daley Plaza are taking no chances. Baby Jesus is secured to the manger by a thick black cable, wrapped around his waist, bolted to the manger floor and covered with hay. "There is no way you'd ever be able to get it out" said Jim Finnegan, co-chair of the committee. One member of the committee, Dan Gure, suggested placing an electric shock device in the manger — which might have been the best idea of all, when you think about it.

Is there anything more perplexing, or — in my mind — sillier — than the yearly battle over whether to say "Merry

Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" — which, it seems to me, ought to be simple for Christians — who welcome one who was so very respectful of the humanity of all people. Because of him, I'm happy to wish Happy Holidays to my Jewish and Muslim friends.

As for silliness — how about the most recent — "Should Santa really be saying 'Ho, Ho, Ho' — because you know what 'Ho' means to some people . . . . Maybe he ought to say 'Ha, Ha, Ha'" — which sounds to me like he's laughing at us — which, come to think about it, maybe he is!

What a season it is. It also brings out the best in us: the impulse to give gifts, the human capacity, hidden much

of the time, for compassion and caring and sharing. No — the Salvation Army Santa Clauses, ringing their bells, standing sentinel on the street corner beside their coin buckets — are not making much difference in the reality of homelessness and chronic poverty in this most affluent society. Nevertheless they tap something important and deep in our hearts — our common humanity, the innate sense that, at our very best, we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, or at the very least, their brothers and sisters.

And it is the season of the child and the children's Christmas pageant. There is a human need to portray the nativity artistically. And some of the most sublime art human beings have ever

produced has been inspired by those events that happened in Bethlehem and Judea 2,000 years ago. Artists of the Italian Renaissance painted the scenes over and over again: young Mary visited by the angel to announce her mysterious pregnancy; Mary's visit with her older cousin Elizabeth, also mysteriously pregnant, the long journey to Bethlehem, the stable with onlooking cows and sheep and birds perched in the rafters, the Virgin, always in blue, Joseph in the background, the sky shimmering with angels, and in the center, a child, a newborn infant.

It has inspired the highest art the human race has ever produced. And it has inspired reenactments — grand and elaborate and common and simple.

A friend of mine down in Texas decided to upgrade his church's "Live Nativity" by including a Long Horn Steer — a live one, and a big one. It was a very popular tableau: hundreds of cars stopped: thousands of people got out to look and ponder. Jerry, my friend, was one of the Magi in the Living Nativity on the night the Long Horn Steer got loose and chased it through the dark streets, across lawns, through hedges and bushes, his Kingly robes and appointments flapping behind him.

And of course, what would the season be without the children's pageant, for my money the best artistic articulation of the incarnation. The classic of course is Barbara Robinson's

***The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. I read it every year. It is narrated by a little girl whose mother is the pageant director. It still makes me laugh out loud — particularly when the pageant director before the first rehearsal tells the story of the birth of Jesus to the cast which includes "the horrible Herdmans," the worst children ever — the Herdmans have never heard the story before — and are mesmerized.**

The director begins —

"Joseph and Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child. . . "

"Pregnant!" yelled Ralph Herdman.

Well, that stirred things up. All the big kids began to giggle and all the little kids wanted to know what was so funny and mother had to hammer on the floor with a blackboard pointer. "That's enough, Ralph" she said and went on with the story.

"I don't think it's very nice to say Mary was pregnant" Alice whispered to me.

"'But she was,' I pointed out. In a way, I agreed with her. It sounded too ordinary. Anybody could be pregnant, 'Great with child' sounded better for Mary."

"I'm not supposed to talk about people being pregnant." Alice folded

her hands in her lap . . . “I’d better tell my mother.”

“Tell her what?”

“That your mother is talking about things like that in church.”

It’s the whole point of the story, of course. Anybody could get pregnant.

Down in Florida six-year-old Eleanor, my granddaughter, was a little late for tryouts and so did not get a speaking part in her church’s pageant. She told her father that she was disappointed and was praying that something might happen to one of the angels so she could get the part. My son reported that Eleanor’s prayers

were answered and she landed a real prize, the part of the Innkeeper— the first Innkeeper — there's a lot of children in that church so the Inn has a management team.

The preacher's job during Advent is a dicey one. We're working overtime to cover all the bases, show up at all the expected places, plan extra services, struggle mightily with the responsibility of saying something intelligent and faithful about a mystery that does not easily reduce to reasonable discourse. I am comforted by the memory of something the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said about Christmas years ago. On Christmas Eve, Niebuhr said, he and his wife always attend a high liturgical church where the proceedings are

turned over to the choir. No preacher, Niebuhr said, is up to the incarnation. Better to let the musicians do it.

In any event, we do our best year after year, and then on Christmas Eve, when it finally arrives, we have to figure out, some of us do, how to be spouses and fathers and grandfathers in between three or four candlelight services.

And, I conclude, after doing it for more than four decades, that the idea we most need to remember and speak about, in the weeks before Christmas, is the idea of waiting, waiting expectantly.

We're not very good at it, actually. Our people think it's already Christmas. They don't want to sing "O Come, O

Come Emmanuel” — about waiting in lonely exile. They want “Joy to the World” — now. It’s not easy to wait. Children certainly experience it — the almost painful waiting and anticipating in the weeks before Christmas.

I recall a time when I failed at it, miserably. I was about 12 years old. I had my heart set on a baseball glove, a new three-fingered model called a “Ball Hawk.” I had been fairly clear about my hopes and expectations. My parents were clear that the Ball Hawk was out of range and besides, my old baseball glove was perfectly usable. Nevertheless my hopes persisted. I had to have that glove. And one day, home alone, I did the unthinkable. I went on a search, in drawers, under beds, and

deep in their closet I found it: the Rawling three-finger Ball Hawk. I could not believe my eyes. I can still see it there. And almost instantaneously I knew something was very wrong. I had destroyed something precious in my impatience, the waiting and anticipating and hoping. I think I carried off my secret, but I did learnt the value of waiting and hoping and expecting as part of Christmas.

It's such an important part of the story. Mary waits for nine months, Joseph waits. The world waits.

There is no more common human experience than waiting. We wait all our lives. We wait to grow up, to go to school; wait to get to Junior High, Senior

High, wait to drive a car, have a date, graduate. Wait to go to college, get a job. Wait to find the right person, wait to earn enough money, wait to start living and enjoying life. Wait for financial security, wait to travel and see the world, wait for retirement.

Around Chicago some have been waiting a long time, a century to be precise, for the Cubs to win a World Series. It's a wait of Biblical proportions.

Observers from other nations can see that we Americans are not very good at waiting. We're impatient in traffic. "Road Rage" is pretty much an American phenomenon — we're not good at waiting in airport security lines or in

doctors' offices. The late Henri Nouwen wrote an essay on "The Spirituality of Waiting" and observed that most of us regard waiting as a waste of time. The culture says "Get going. Do something. Don't just sit there and wait."

It is significant that one of the synonyms we use for waiting is "killing time."

There is a lot of waiting in the Bible, but it is not "killing time." It is waiting expectantly, waiting in faith, waiting for God.

The Psalms are full of people waiting:

"Wait for the Lord
I will wait for the Lord

For you I wait all day long

Those who wait for the Lord, shall renew their strength, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

That's not killing time. That's busy, expectant waiting.

Years ago, the late Halford Luccock wrote an Advent column for *The Christian Century* that I get out and read every year, *Living on Tiptoe.* "Nothing really great ever happened without a great many lives being lived in expectation" he wrote.

People who live on tiptoe are the kind of folks by whom the world moves

forward, who live in a state of expectancy.

At the end of the essay, Luccock issued a challenge that stretches across the years — and resonates deeply — as we read and watch so carefully and frequently — the news — of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Israel and Palestine.

“Are our spirits on tiptoe or stretched on a couch? There is one easy way to learn the answer. What is our habitual attitude to the world’s ‘impossible,’ the great dreams of humanity — the abolition of war, the unity of humankind, the curbing of greed, the exploitation of the underprivileged? Do we live and work in eager anticipation of those things?”

Samuel Beckett wrote a famous play, “Waiting for Godot,” in 1953. The play is widely cited as a metaphor for the spiritual malaise of modern men and women. In the play two characters wait, and wait, and wait for Godot who never comes. The name ‘Godot’ itself seems to be a synonym for God. And Beckett’s bleak message is that all our waiting is empty. Godot never comes.

Why is it that Christmas touches so deeply, touches a chord deep in the human heart? Why does Christmas get to us — believers and non-believers — and tap a yearning and longing that seems to be universal?

What is it about us, all of us, that is empty, always watching the horizon for a bright and shining star to dawn? What is the universal yearning in the dark night if the soul? What are we waiting for?

The answer — shared by all religions, all philosophies, is love: some sense that there is a reality beyond ourselves, beyond the boundaries of our mortality, that knows us, and cares about us, and comes to us as we struggle, as we worry and fret, as we wait — love that comes like light in the darkness.

That's what's behind all the Hullabaloos, the lovely traditions and

the glitzy commercialism, the simple reality that everyone is waiting for love.

The Christian answer is that we're waiting for Jesus. But beyond that — everyone is waiting for love, waiting for the day when love takes shape in the world: when weapons are turned into agriculture implements: when love takes shape between people and men and women care for each other and take care of the weal and most vulnerable: when love takes shape in respect for individuals, regardless of their race or station or politics or sexual orientation: when love becomes justice and everyone is treated equitably and fairly.

That finally is what it's all about. The late William Sloane Coffin said

Descartes was wrong — “cogito ergo sum” — “I think therefore I am.” “Nonsense!” Coffin said, ‘Amo ergo sum’ — ‘I love therefore I am.’”

One of the great and fascinating public figures around Chicago is Henry Betts, M.D., founder and former CEO of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. Henry is a tireless advocate for people with disabilities and is largely responsible for the Americans with Disabilities Act which Congress passed several years ago. When you see those curb cuts that are now almost universal — thank Henry Betts.

We were having lunch and I asked Henry what is the most important thing we can do for persons with disabilities.

He told me a story about a young boy, a teenager who was very severely handicapped physically. He could do nothing for himself — which for a while, for a baby and young child — works, but for an adolescent becomes very difficult for everyone. The boy's intellect was fine — but as a result of his multiple handicaps he had totally withdrawn: wouldn't get out of bed, wouldn't allow anyone to sit him upright, simply would lie in bed in a foetal position all day long at the Rehab Institute. And then one day, because of a glitch in the admission process the Rehab Institute had a patient for which there was no space — a young boy, four years old, who had severe burns all over his body. Because the handicapped teenager was so withdrawn and unresponsive, the staff

moved the little burned child into the same room. Before long the handicapped teenager noticed him lying there in pain. And something happened — a miracle happened. The handicapped teenager started to care about his little roommate. And pretty soon he was pressing the call button telling the nurses to bring medication, did they think a drink of water might help, maybe someone should be with him, maybe there was something more someone could do. The teenager started to care — to have compassion, to love — and — to live.

“Amo ergo sum.”

That’s what we’re waiting for. And that, I plan to remind myself in the

weeks ahead, so very busy and crowded, full of beauty but also seasonal silliness — that is what we're all waiting for. When I'm a little weary of the whole business, I plan to remind myself that Christmas is about love — and I hope you will, too.